# Responding appropriately to the impersonal good

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# Responding Appropriately to the Impersonal Good

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## 1. Introduction

Consequentialism and deontology remain the two most influential positions in normative ethics, and the debate between proponents of both camps is alive and well. Arguments for and against consequentialism and deontology have become more and more sophisticated, as have formulations of the respective views. One reason why the debate has been continuing up to this day is that both views are supported by powerful ideas.[1] It is therefore not a good argumentative strategy to raise objections that are based on intuitions against deontology or consequentialism: defenders of either theory can always put forward intuitions in favor of their view.

A better way to make progress in the debate is to unravel the background assumptions of the respective theories and to discuss whether these background assumptions are sound. Philosophers working in this debate have therefore focused on questions such as whether a teleological conception of practical reasons is justified (Portmore 2011; Hurley 2018), whether states of affairs are the primary bearers of value (Anderson 1993; Maguire 2016), etc. While it might not be possible to decide some of these questions without an antecedent commitment to either consequentialism or deontology, this strategy promises either to provide new and indirect arguments against deontology or consequentialism (in case the respective theory rests on implausible assumptions), or at least to illustrate what problems proponents of each camp need to resolve.

This paper contributes to this broader research program of unraveling and discussing the background assumptions of normative theories. More specifically, I will discuss and reject one

[1] In my view, the powerful idea of consequentialism is that what we have reason to do depends on what is good, and the powerful idea of deontology is that morality includes agent-relative elements.

assumption of consequentialism that, to my knowledge, has not been noticed by philosophers so far. The result is a novel objection against consequentialism.

## 2. Standard Act Consequentialism

In what follows, I will be concerned with a paradigm version of consequentialism which I will call Standard Act Consequentialism (SAC). SAC holds that an action is right if and only if (and because) performing the action maximizes intrinsic value. In other words, SAC claims that morality is about making the world as good as possible. And importantly, SAC is an agent-neutral theory: the intrinsic value that is to be maximized might be understood in terms of the good-for relation, so that something that is intrinsically good must be good for someone, but for an agent who decides what to do it should not matter whether her act benefits herself, someone she loves, or a complete stranger. For example, if pleasure is intrinsically good, then SAC claims that an act is right if and because it leads to as much pleasure as possible, but it does not matter whether the agent or someone else experiences the pleasure. When we decide what to do, proponents of SAC ask us to take "the point of view […] of the Universe" (Sidgwick 1907: 382) in which no person is more important than any other person, rather than the personal point of view in which our own lives matter more to us than the lives of others. A common way to express this idea is to say that SAC is concerned with the impersonal good (Baron 2008; Portmore 2011; Wedgwood 2016).

In its classical characterization, SAC is a theory about which actions are right and what makes them right, but it is also possible to understand SAC as a theory about which moral reasons we have and where our moral reasons come from (McElwee 2010; Nair 2014; Dougherty 2016). Put in terms of moral reasons, proponents of SAC hold that moral reasons are reasons to promote intrinsic value, that the strength of such a reason is a function of how much value the action would promote, that an act is right iff it is supported by at least as strong (or weighty) reasons as every alternative, and

that an act is required if it is supported by the strongest (or weightiest) reasons.[2] Framing SAC in terms of reasons has certain advantages: it retains both the consequentialist core idea that morality is concerned with what is good and the impartialism that many find attractive about consequentialism (McElwee 2010: 396). Furthermore, it allows to make all claims that the classical formulation of SAC allows us to make, but it also helps to see what different versions of consequentialism have in common and why they qualify as members of the consequentialist family. For example, satisficing consequentialists think that we are not required to maximize value, but to bring about results that are good enough (Slote 1984). And scalar consequentialists claim that we should abandon the concept of rightness altogether and merely speak about the comparable value of outcomes and the corresponding strength of the reasons to bring about those outcomes (Norcross 2006). Framing consequentialism in terms of reasons explains what satisficing consequentialism, scalar consequentialism, and SAC have in common: they all claim that moral reasons are provided by the agent-neutral value of outcomes (but, of course, they disagree about how such reasons generate moral requirements). By contrast, understanding consequentialism *solely* in terms of the rightness of acts has difficulties to explain why these theories should count as members of the same family. For example, scalar consequentialism would not count as a consequentialist view, since it does not say anything about the rightness of acts. Since characterizing consequentialism in terms of reasons allows us to make all claims that the classical formulation allows us to make, but also allows for a more nuanced characterization of the consequentialist family, I will work with such a framework in what follows.

How, then, should we characterize moral reasons according to SAC? Ultimately, the source of these reasons is the impersonal good. Agents may have prudential reasons to pursue their own good, but

[2] These claims about rightness will be accepted by proponents of SAC, but not by all proponents of reasons consequentialism. For example, proponents of scalar consequentialists will reject them. I will return to this point shortly.

moral reasons are provided by the impersonal good, and they are reasons to promote the impersonal good, understood in agent-neutral terms. As a result, SAC only accepts agent-neutral reasons as moral reasons (McNaughton/Rawling 1995; Zong 2000; Wallace 2009). Agent-neutral reasons differ from agent-relative reasons in that their full specification does not include an essential reference to the agent whose reasons they are (McNaughton/Rawling 1995; Ridge 2005). Agent-relative reasons include project-dependent reasons (reasons to pursue one's own projects), relationship-dependent reasons (reasons to care for and benefit one's loves ones), and restrictions (reasons not to perform acts of certain kinds, such as telling lies or killing innocents).[3] To acknowledge agent-relative reasons is to acknowledge that morality permits agents to put special significance on their own lives and actions. But according to SAC, agents are not permitted to do so. After all, when determining the impersonal good, they must abstract from their own identities.

To sum up, proponents of SAC make several basic assumptions. First, and most obviously, SAC is a value-first view. That is, value has conceptual priority over reasons, and what agents have reason to do depends on what is good. And SAC grounds *moral* reasons in the impersonal good: what agents have moral reason to do depends on what would be impersonally (or agent-neutrally) good. The second important assumption of SAC is that states of affairs are the (primary) bearers of value. Other entities, such as objects or experiences, are good only insofar as they contribute to valuable states of affairs. Finally, SAC has a maximizing structure: agents are not just morally required to promote morally good states of affairs. They are required to maximize the impersonal good; that is, they are required to bring about the impersonally best state of affairs that they can bring about.

The maximizing structure is the most controversial part of SAC, because it makes the theory very demanding. It implies that whenever one does something that leads to suboptimal results, one is acting wrongly. This includes going to the movies, spending an evening on the couch, or buying a

[3] This threefold distinction of agent-relative reasons goes back to Thomas Nagel's seminal work on this topic. See Nagel (1986).

new pair of shoes that one does not need, given that one could bring about more good with one's time, money, and energy by working for or donating to charity. One is also acting wrongly when one gives special consideration to the needs of one's own child if neglecting one's child for the sake of a different action would lead to impersonally better consequences. And one might even be required to sacrifice one's own life if that leads to the best possible state of affairs, even if the gain in value is only relatively small. But it seems plausible to suppose that agents are permitted to spend at least some of their money and free time as they see fit, that they are permitted (or even required) to give special consideration to their loved ones, and that they are not required to sacrifice their own life just to make the world a little bit better. Since the maximizing structure of SAC contradicts our moral practice to a considerable degree, it is safe to say that it is the most controversial part of SAC.

Despite its counterintuitive implications, proponents of SAC accept the maximizing character of their view. Some authors even think that the maximizing view is consequentialism's compelling idea – how can it not be morally right to make the world as good as possible (Scheffler 1982; McElwee 2010; Sachs 2010; Dreier 2011)? Other authors argue that this allegedly compelling idea is not so compelling after all, and that SAC, therefore, has no intuitive support (Hurley 2017). In my view, the maximizing view of consequentialism appears compelling because it seems to follow from other basic assumptions that are compelling themselves. It is compelling to think that what we have reason to do depends on what is good, and the impersonal good appears to be a plausible interpretation of the compelling idea that impartiality is an important feature of the moral point of view. From these assumptions, it may seem to follow that we ought to maximize the impersonal good.

However, I think that this is a mistake. Even if we accept that moral reasons are grounded in the impersonal good, it does not follow that we are required to bring about the best possible state of affairs. The impersonal good is a higher-level good in the sense that it is not independent of other goods, such as the successful pursuit of personal projects, the occurrence of pleasure, the existence

of valuable relationships, and so on, but it is constituted by such goods. And contrary to what proponents of SAC assume, an appropriate response to the impersonal good as a higher-level good need not be a response to that good as a whole. It can also be a response to one of its constituent parts in particular. Thus, we cannot assume that morality is about maximizing the impersonal good without further argument – or so I will argue. But before I do so, some preparatory work is necessary.

## 3. Complex Goods, Simple Goods, and Appropriate Value Responses

My argument relies on a distinction between what I will call complex goods on the one hand and simple goods on the other. This distinction concerns the good-making features of the respective entities. Simple goods are intrinsic goods of which no proper subpart is intrinsically good. By contrast, complex goods are intrinsic goods of which some proper subparts are intrinsically good and where there are meaningful relations between these subparts.[4] In other words, a simple good is constituted of one good-making feature, whereas a complex good is constituted of the combination of several goods, and thus several good-making features, into a complex whole.[5]

Some examples might help to clarify this distinction. A beautiful painting is an example of a simple good. The individual brush strokes of the painting are valueless, but their combination constitutes great value. Hence, the only good-making property of the painting is the way in which otherwise valueless parts are brought into a coherent whole. Simple goods might be quite complex entities, as valuable paintings arguably are, but the elements that constitute the complex whole are not valuable when taken in isolation. By contrast, an opera performance is an example of a complex

[4] From now on, I will drop the "intrinsic" qualifier.

[5] The notion of a complex good resembles Joseph Raz's concept of a genre-constituting value. See Raz (2003). See also Ralph Wedgwood's discussion of complex values in Wedgwood (2009), as well as my discussion in Löschke (2017).

good. It also combines different parts into a coherent whole, but these different parts are good when considered in isolation. The constituent elements of an opera performance are the singing, the orchestra performance, the conducting, the stage design, etc. These parts have aesthetic value when taken in isolation, and when they are combined, they constitute a distinct kind of good that is more than a mere aggregate of aesthetically valuable things. The good-making features of such a complex good are the goods that constitute it as well as their specific combination.

In somewhat more familiar terminology, complex goods are a subclass of organic unities. They are those instances of organic unities where (at least some of) the individual constituent parts are valuable when taken in isolation. However, the distinction between complex goods and simple goods is not identical with the distinction between entities that are organic unities and those that are not: some simple goods are organic unities, but organic unities whose constituent parts are not valuable when taken in isolation (for example, beautiful paintings). Other simple goods might be no organic unities at all (pleasure might be a case in point). Furthermore, the distinction between complex goods and simple goods is not exhaustive. Besides simple goods and complex goods, there are also aggregate goods. These are goods whose individual parts are valuable when taken in isolation, but whose individual parts lack meaningful relations between them. Unlike simple goods, complex goods are constituted of parts that are good when taken in isolation, and unlike aggregate goods, complex goods have parts with meaningful relations between them.

Note that this distinction between simple goods and complex goods is compatible with most views regarding the primary bearers of value. Not only is it compatible with the view that concrete objects or abstract objects are the primary bearers of value, but it is also compatible with the consequentialist view that the primary bearers of value are states of affairs, since states of affairs can also have one good-making feature or several good-making features that occur at the same time. Some readers might think that there is no such thing as a simple good, but only complex goods with varying degrees of complexity. I will leave it open whether this is the case; such a view would still be compatible with what I am about to say in the remainder of this paper.

Now, let us suppose for the sake of the argument that a value-first view is plausible and that we should accept a value-based theory of practical reasons. This means that valuable entities generate reasons for action. The question is how to understand the link between value and reasons exactly.

One possible answer is that value generates reasons for promotion. On this view, practical reasons are always reasons to bring about valuable states of affairs. This view is plausible in many regards, but we should not take it for granted. It presupposes that states of affairs are the bearers of value, and this claim might be contested. Furthermore, some authors (Pettit 1991; Suikkanen 2005) claim that the difference between consequentialist and non-consequentialist theories might just be that consequentialists think that value generates reasons for promotion, whereas deontologists think that value generates reasons to honor or respect what is valuable.[6] Hence, stipulating that value generates reasons for promotion begs the question in favor of consequentialism.

However, even if we draw the distinction between consequentialist and non-consequentialist theories in this way, there is a sense in which both sides agree on a more abstract level. Both sides understand the link between value and reasons in terms of appropriate responses: what an agent has reason to do, and what she is subsequently required to do, is to perform an act that would be an appropriate response to value. Both sides disagree on what kind of response to value is appropriate: consequentialists think that the appropriate response to value is promotion (and some think that it is maximization), whereas (some) non-consequentialists think that the appropriate response to value is honoring or respecting. But both sides agree that agents have reason to respond appropriately to value.

[6] I do not claim that this interpretation of the distinction between consequentialist and non-consequentialist theories is the most plausible one. Many non-consequentialists simply reject a value-first view. See also McNaughton/Rawling (1992) for some problems with drawing the distinction in this way. My point is simply that we should not assume that value generates reasons for promotion.

If we understand the link between value and reasons in terms of appropriate responses, then this means that both complex goods and simple goods generate reasons, namely reasons to respond appropriately to the respective goods. The question is: what kind of responses are appropriate?

Importantly, there are two ways to understand this question in the case of complex goods. First, one might understand it in the way that I just sketched and ask what kind of response to a given complex good is appropriate – whether, say, an agent responds appropriately to some complex good by maximizing it, or by respecting it, or whatever. But there is also another way to understand this question that is just as important, although it has never been discussed, as far as I know: does an appropriate response to a complex good have to be a response to the good as a whole, or can it sometimes be a response to a proper subset of its constituent parts in particular? The constituent parts of a complex whole are good when they are considered in isolation, and as good objects, they also call for appropriate responses. The appropriate response to a complex good might therefore consist in a response to a constituent feature of that complex good. This is the question that I will turn to now.

## 4. Responding to Complex Goods

In general, there seems to be no reason to think that an appropriate response to a complex good has to be a response to that good as a whole, if this means that the response must be a response to all constituent parts of the complex whole equally, or that the response must be a response to the way the constituent parts mesh to create the complex good. Responding to the whole may be appropriate but responding to a proper part may also be appropriate. Consider again the case of the opera performance. Arguably, one way of responding appropriately to the aesthetic value of an

opera performance is to appreciate its value and pay close attention to it.[7] But that does not mean that an agent only responds appropriately to an opera performance if she pays attention to the performance as a whole (where paying attention to the performance as a whole means paying attention to the orchestra, the singing, the stage design, etc. to the same degree, or paying attention to how these different parts are brought together into a complex whole). It seems wholly appropriate for her to respond to the aesthetic value of an opera performance by paying close attention to the singing, or by focusing on the orchestra. Hence, an appropriate response to a complex good can be a response to a proper subset of its constituent parts.

This does not mean that the agent responds appropriately to the complex good of an opera performance by responding *merely* to the singing, or *merely* to the orchestra. It would be an inappropriate response to a complex good to focus on some of its constituent parts and ignore the other constituent parts completely. If the agent pays attention only to the orchestra performance and completely ignores the singing, the stage design, etc., she does not respond to the aesthetic value of an *opera performance* as a distinct kind of good, but to the aesthetic value of an orchestra performance. We might therefore say that in the case of a complex good, an appropriate response to that good need not be a response to the good as a whole, but can also be a response to all of the constituent parts of that complex whole but with special attention given to some over others. If it is a response to some parts in particular, then the appropriateness of the agent's response is constrained by the parts that are *not* given special attention: it is not appropriate to respond only to specific constituent parts of a complex whole and to ignore the other constituent parts completely.

[7] These, of course, are two different things: appreciating the aesthetic value is an attitude; paying close attention to the performance is an action. I will assume that both attitudes and actions can be appropriate responses to value. Some readers might prefer to talk about intentions, rather than actions as appropriate responses to value. In principle, I would be happy with that as well; as far as I can see, nothing in what follows depends on this.

Now, there is a complication here that needs to be addressed. If an appropriate response to a complex good can be a response to the good as a whole as well as a response to a proper subset of its constituent parts, then this might seem to lead to a problematic kind of double counting.[8] Consider the following. Regarding the opera performance, my argument seems to imply that the orchestra performance (or any other constituent part of the opera performance) is normatively relevant in several ways: it is normatively relevant on its own (since it is good when taken in isolation and gives agents reason to respond appropriately to it), and in addition, it is normatively relevant as a part of the complex good (since the opera performance is good and gives agents reason to respond appropriately to it, and responding to the good as a whole includes responding to its constituent parts). Hence, one and the same valuable entity generates two reasons for response. And it might even generate further reasons: if an agent has a reason to respond to the orchestra performance in particular, then it seems plausible to assume that she also has a reason to respond to the combination of the orchestra performance and the singing in particular, even if this falls short of responding to all constituent parts of the opera performance equally. Hence, the orchestra performance might generate a third reason for response, and so on.[9]

While it is true that the argument in this paper implies that a constituent part of a complex good can be normatively relevant in several ways, I do not think that this is problematic. It simply means that agents often have several options when they respond to a complex good. This is no problematic double counting of normatively relevant elements, because from the fact that an agent has responded to the complex good with a focus on one constituent part in particular, it does not follow that she is also required to respond to the complex good with a focus on all other proper subsets of its constitutive parts. There is certainly no general requirement, moral or otherwise, for agents to act on all reasons that they have (which would be impossible anyway, given the limitations

[8] I thank an anonymous referee for raising this worry.

[9] Compare the illuminating discussion of basic value in Zimmerman (2001).

on their time, energy, etc.). Hence, instead of presenting a problematic case of double counting, the opera example explains the plausible intuition that there is often not only one adequate way to respond to a valuable entity but several options to do so.

But maybe this answer is too quick. Suppose that an act would make John and Jill happy.[10] Furthermore, suppose for the sake of the argument that the state of affairs of John and Jill being happy is a complex good whose constituent elements are John being happy and Jill being happy. If the state of affairs of John and Jill being happy counts as a complex good, then my argument seems to imply that this complex good provides us with three reasons: a reason to make John happy (because making John happy would be an appropriate response to the complex good with a special focus on its constituent element of John being happy), a reason to make Jill happy (because making Jill happy would be an appropriate response to the complex good with a special focus on its constituent element of Jill being happy), and a reason to make both John and Jill happy (because making John and Jill happy would be an appropriate response to the complex good as a whole). And this seems to be wrong. Intuitively, there seem to be two reasons here, not three. And some readers might think that this kind of double counting *is* problematic: it is an unnecessary proliferation of reasons and requires us to favor more complex outcomes over simple ones, simply due to additional reasons that are made out of thin air.

This is a legitimate worry, but several things can be said in response. First, it is not obvious that the state of affairs of John and Jill being happy really counts as a complex good. If John and Jill are complete strangers to each other, then the state of affairs of John and Jill being happy rather appears to be an aggregate good.[11] After all, there is no meaningful relation between John being happy and Jill being happy. And this might explain why one might think that there is some problematic double counting going in. To see this, suppose that there *are* meaningful relations

[10] I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

[11] I will return to this point briefly in the next section.

between John being happy and Jill being happy – for example, suppose that John and Jill are romantic partners and deeply desire to be happy together. In this case, it is not unreasonable to suppose that you have three reasons: a reason to make John happy, a reason to make Jill happy, and a reason to make [John and Jill] happy that cannot be reduced to the aggregate of [making John happy] and [making Jill happy]. If this is correct, then this is evidence that the problem of double counting indicates that the good in question is an aggregate good rather than a complex good.

Now, some readers might object that this does not solve the problem, because even if it were correct, it would still be the case that complex goods lead to a proliferation of reasons that requires us to favor complex outcomes over simple ones for no good reason. But this worry is unwarranted. Such a requirement would only arise on the additional assumption that reasons accrue in a very simple way and that, if one reason speaks in favor of doing A and three reasons speak in favor of doing B, you ought to do B. And this is certainly not generally the case.[12] It would take another paper to discuss the relation between reasons and requirements on the view sketched here. At this point, I simply want to point out that the view in question does not imply that we are always required to favor complex outcomes over simple ones.

A third consideration that shows why there is no such requirement is this. Even if we understand the state of affairs of John and Jill being happy as a complex good, and even if we assume that reasons add up in the simple way that I just described, it still does not follow that we are always required to favor complex outcomes over simple ones. Suppose that I have three reasons to φ and only one reason to ψ. In order to make it the case that the mere addition of the three reasons to φ generates a requirement to φ, it would have to be the case that I can respond to all three reasons at once by φ-ing, because only in this case would φ-ing actually be supported by more reasons than ψ-ing. And this condition is not met in the case of complex goods. Hence, there can be no requirement to always favor complex outcomes over simple ones.

[12] It would imply that a sufficient amount of trivial reasons outweighs very weighty reasons.

To see this, take the following example. Suppose that you have the choice between attending two parties. Three reasons speak in favor of going to party A, namely the fact that you will be able to talk to Adam, that you will be able to talk to Beth, and that you will be able to talk to Chris. Only one reason speaks in favor of going to party B, namely the fact that you will be able to talk to Doris. Now, intuitively it seems that the three reasons that speak in favor of attending party A make it the case that you ought to go there, all else being equal. But now suppose that Adam, Beth, and Chris despise each other, and that as soon as you talk to one of them, the other two will feel insulted and will refuse talking to you for the rest of the evening. Does it still make sense to say that you ought to go to party A? This seems implausible. Even though you might have three reasons to attend party A, you can act on only one reason by going there, just as you can act on only one reason by attending party B. Hence, you have just as much reason to attend party A as you have reason to attend party B. This illustrates that aggregations of reasons are only relevant if you can act on all of the aggregated reasons at once.

Now, the party example does not involve cases of double counting or complex goods. Nevertheless, it is relevant for present purposes, because the considerations that apply to the party case also apply to complex goods: it is not possible to act on all reasons that are provided by a complex good at once. When I make John happy in the example above, I do not merely respond to the value of John being happy: I respond to the complex good of John and Jill being happy with a special focus on its constituent part of John being happy. When I make Jill happy, I respond to the complex good of John and Jill being happy with a special focus on its constituent part of Jill being happy. And when I make both John and Jill happy, I respond to the complex good of John and Jill being happy as a whole. Hence, there might be three reasons that are provided by the complex good of John and Jill being happy. But there is no action that I can perform that is such that I simultaneously respond to John being happy *in particular*, Jill being happy *in particular*, and the complex good of John and Jill being happy as a whole. Responding to John being happy in particular rules out responding to Jill being happy in particular, and it also rules out responding to John and Jill being

happy to equal parts. Hence, even if it is true that John being happy is normatively relevant in several ways (on its own and as part of a complex whole), the fact that it is not possible to respond to all of these normatively relevant ways at once suggests that this is no problematic case of double counting because it does not generate an ought that is grounded in a proliferation of reasons. Again, it merely extends the options of an agent for appropriate value responses.

Let me sum up. The distinction between complex goods and simple goods is independently plausible. Furthermore, it is independently plausible to suppose that an appropriate response to a complex good can sometimes be a response to a proper subset of its constituent parts, and that this does not amount to a problematic form of double counting. With these considerations in mind, I return to the case of the impersonal good. The question is whether we should understand the impersonal good as a complex good. If the answer is yes, then the considerations about appropriate responses to complex goods also apply to appropriate responses to the impersonal good. And as I will argue now, this is exactly how we should understand the impersonal good.

## 5. The Impersonal Good as a Complex Good

The impersonal good is a higher-level good: it is constituted by lower-level goods that are realized in the lives of agents.[13] Proponents of SAC often understand the impersonal good as an aggregate, as the mere sum of its constituent parts. This interpretation is plausible on a hedonist view: if one thinks that pleasure is all that matters, then it makes sense to understand the impersonal good as the total aggregate of pleasure that is experienced in the world. But hedonism is implausible as a complete axiology. On a more plausible pluralist view, according to which several goods such as "happiness, knowledge, purposeful activity, autonomy, solidarity, respect, and beauty" (Railton

[13] To avoid misunderstanding: when I talk of the impersonal good as a higher-order good, I simply mean that it is constituted by other goods. This does not mean that value arises only on the higher level: it arises also on the lower level of the constituent parts of the impersonal good.

1984: 149) contribute to the goodness of a state of affairs, it is more plausible to understand the impersonal good as a complex good.

To see why, consider an important difference between aggregates of goods and complex goods which concerns their internal structure. Aggregates are mere sums of disparate elements with no internal structure that unifies the different parts and constitutes a distinct kind of object. By contrast, complex goods have such an internal structure and they are coherent wholes because of it. For example, a mere aggregate of disparate objects (say, a walnut, a toy car, and a vacuum cleaner) has no internal structure – the objects are just there simultaneously. By contrast, an opera performance does have an internal structure that unifies its different parts: the orchestra responds to the singing, the stage design reflects an important aspect of the underlying themes of the opera, which is also reflected by the music, and so on. As a result, the different parts of the opera constitute a distinct object, namely an opera performance, rather than an orchestra performance which also happens to include costumes and singing.

It is for characterizing complex goods as exhibiting a certain internal structure that it is more plausible to understand the impersonal good as a complex good rather than a mere aggregate of goods. An important difference between SAC and non-consequentialist theories is that the latter allow for morally justified conflict, whereas the former does not (Portmore 2011). From a non-consequentialist point of view, you and I may be permitted (or even required) to compete for a scarce resource (say, because I need it to save my daughter's life, and you need it to save your daughter's life). Following SAC, there is no such morally justified conflict, because SAC is a theory that "gives to all agents common moral aims" (Parfit 1984: 27). And strictly speaking, it is not the theory itself that gives agents aims, but the normative entity that the theory understands as reason-providing – in the case of SAC, the impersonal good. If the impersonal good can give common aims to all agents, then this means that it can harmonize the individual ends of different persons.

And this means that the impersonal good must be capable of establishing meaningful relations between the individual ends of different agents.[14]

To see this, suppose that we have a society of convinced consequentialists. The members of this society will pursue personal projects, since this is a kind of meaningful activity and meaningful activity is intrinsically valuable. But they will not adopt just any kind of project: since they understand the impersonal good as reason-providing, they will also understand the projects of others as reason-providing, given that such projects are also constituent parts of the impersonal good. Hence, a member of the society who deliberates about which project to adopt will also take the projects of others into consideration. For example, she will not adopt a project that prevents many other members of the society from pursuing their respective personal projects. The fact that the project of one person will be at least partly shaped by the projects of others means that there will be meaningful relations between the individual projects; and since the individual projects are constituent parts of the impersonal good, it follows that the impersonal good is a good whose constituent parts are good when taken in isolation and exhibit meaningful relations between each other. And this is just the definition of a complex good.[15]

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[14] What does it mean to say that there are meaningful relations between the individual ends of different agents? Several answers might be possible here, but one possibility suggests itself: ends have meaningful relations if they respond to each other. And they do so if the content of one person's end influences the content of the ends of others. There is again a clear analogy to an opera performance: the individual parts of the performance also respond to each other. For example, if the content of the story has an impact on the music and how it is performed, or if the stage design reflects an important motif of the story, then this establishes meaningful relations between these individual parts.

[15] An anonymous referee has pointed out to me that this is an example from a social setting, and that, if my claim about meaningful relations is correct, then it should be possible that there are meaningful relations between the ends of different agents if each agent is cut off from every other agent. Admittedly, as I understand meaningful relations between individual ends, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which every agent is cut off from every other agent and there still being meaningful relations between their individual ends. Such agents will not be able to take the ends

If the impersonal good is a complex good rather than a mere aggregate of goods, then the considerations about appropriate responses to complex goods apply to the impersonal good as well. An appropriate response to the impersonal good need not be a response to the impersonal good as a whole. Rather, it might also be appropriate to respond to some of its constituent parts in particular, as long as the other constituent parts are not ignored. Hence, since the personal projects of an agent are a constituent part of the impersonal good, an agent might respond appropriately to the impersonal good by responding to her personal project in particular (as long as she does not ignore other constituent parts of the impersonal good). And along similar lines, it might be an appropriate response to the impersonal good to respond to one's own relationships or one's own well-being in particular. The claim that agents are required to maximize the impersonal good implies that it is only appropriate to respond to the impersonal good as a whole, and this is an assumption that cannot be taken for granted but needs to be argued for. Proponents of SAC thus face a challenge: insofar as they claim that agents are required to maximize the impersonal good, they also claim that an appropriate response to the impersonal good is always a response to that good as a whole. They therefore need to show why the impersonal good differs from other kinds of complex goods in that it is only appropriate to respond to the good as a whole rather than to

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of other agents into consideration when they determine what to do, and their individual ends will not be respond to each other. However, I do not think that this is a problem for my view. In a scenario where every agent is cut off from every other agent, the question whether you an agent is permitted to put special significance on her own life or whether she ought to sacrifice her own projects or relationships for the sake of others never arises. All she can do is pursuing her own projects. Hence, I am willing to bite the bullet and say that in such a scenario, there is no impersonal good to which agents can respond. Upon reflection, I do not think that this is implausible. The consequentialist concern with the impersonal good is usually a concern with how to balance the interests (or ends, or projects) of one person against the interests (or ends, or projects) of others. In a scenario in which every agent is cut off from any other agent, such a question does not arise.

specific constituent parts in particular. As far as I know, consequentialists have not defended this assumption so far.

Now, proponents of SAC might object that the analogy to the opera performance is misleading, and that moral agents are not merely contemplating the impersonal good but are (co-)creating it.[16] Hence, we are in the situation analogous to that of an opera director, and it would not be appropriate for the director to focus particularly on one aspect of the performance, such as the singing, if this makes the overall performance less good than if she were to focus evenly on all its parts, because her task, as a director, is to make the performance as a whole as good as possible. Similarly, one might argue that our task as moral agents is to make the world as a whole as good as possible.

This objection presupposes that the task of the opera director is to make the performance as a whole as good as possible. This assumption strikes me as implausible. The task of the opera director rather seems to be to provide a compelling interpretation of the opera. And as I have argued in a previous work (Löschke 2017), interpreting an object – an opera, a philosophical text, a value, etc. – consists in (very roughly speaking) identifying the constitutive features of the object and assigning them a certain weight or importance for an adequate understanding of the whole. A compelling interpretation of the opera might therefore consist in assigning more importance to the singing than, say, to the orchestra performance. Analogously, one might say that as moral agents, we are *interpreters* of the impersonal good; we therefore have to determine how much importance we need to assign to the different constituent parts of the impersonal good. And it is not obvious that we have to assign the same importance to each of these constituent parts, just as the opera director does not have to assign the same importance to the singing that she does to the orchestra.

But this might not convince all proponents of SAC. They might also question whether responding to a part of a complex good should at all count as a response to the complex good, especially in

[16] I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this.

cases where improving one part of a whole leads to a decrease in the overall value of the whole.[17] Suppose that the opera director replaces the final aria of the performance with another aria, which is, in itself, aesthetically better, but fits less well into the performance as a whole. By improving the last part of the performance, she therefore makes the performance as a whole less good. In such a case, one might think that it is implausible to claim that the director responds to the complex good (i.e., the performance as a whole), and that this shows that responding to a complex good implies maximizing this good.

However, was the director actually to replace the final aria of the opera with another aria, then she would no longer respond to the complex good that she intended to respond to. By changing the final aria, the director changes the whole opera altogether. A Tannhäuser without its finale is not the Tannhäuser after all but something different. Hence, what the example shows is not necessarily that responding appropriately to a complex good means maximizing the complex good. Rather, it shows that responding appropriately to a complex good means responding appropriately *to that good* – and to the specific elements that constitute *this specific* complex good. Of course, it might be more appropriate to respond to good B than to good A, but that is a different question. Responding to good B certainly does not count as an appropriate response to good A. Hence, this second possible objection can be answered as well.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have argued that consequentialists rely on an unwarranted assumption, namely the assumption that an appropriate response to a complex good is necessarily a response to that good as a whole. Instead, it can also be an appropriate response to a complex good to focus on a proper subset of its constituent parts. The impersonal good is a complex good, and it is constituted by

[17] Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

goods that occur in people's lives. This means that an agent can respond appropriately to the impersonal good by putting a special emphasis on her own life, her projects, relationships, etc. SAC-Consequentialists have more work to do to defend the claim that morality is about maximizing the impersonal good, since maximizing the impersonal good is a response to the impersonal good as a whole. What they need to show is that the impersonal good is a complex good that can only be responded to appropriately by responding to it as a whole.

Of course, nothing that I have said in this paper refutes consequentialism, strictly speaking. But it does demonstrate that proponents of SAC need to show that the impersonal good differs from all other kinds of complex goods in that an appropriate response to that good has to be a response to the good as a whole rather than a response with a special focus on some of its constituent parts. There is new work for consequentialists to defend their theory against its critics.

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